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ETHNIC DIFFERENCES IN EDUCATION AND DIVERGING PROSPECTS FOR URBAN YOUTH IN AN ENLARGED EUROPE

policy brief

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ETHNIC DIFFERENCES IN COMPULSORY EDUCATION

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Abstract

Compulsory education in Europe has shown increasing symptoms of malfunctioning in recent years. As revealed, sizeable groups of children seem not to receive even primary education; other groups formally complete compulsory schooling without learning even the basics; yet other groups leave school early or drop out prior to acquiring any certificates usable on the job market; yet others are diverted to the side-tracks of mainstream education. Furthermore, these new phenomena are heavily loaded with social and ethnic/racial implications: evidence shows that it is mostly the children of marginalised groups, and most of all, children of poor families of minority ethnic background who are at risk. This document distinguishes four markedly different phases of compulsory education with diverse causes and manifestations of the shortcomings. By drawing on a range of experiences and policy attempts in countries representing the continent's welfare states, the discussion explores the involved policy dilemmas and possible reconciliatory actions in the respective phases. Through identifying a set of key aspects of designing efficient interventions, this policy brief aims to initiate a European-level dialogue on principles and practices that may assist in (re)establishing children's unconditional and equal rights to meaningful education all across the continent.

The right of children to free education that is compulsory in the fundamental stages was first announced with worldwide coverage in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Europe had good reasons to celebrate the birth of this important document as a great civilising achievement and the victory of norms that had regulated its own history from the second half of the 19th century. When the Declaration came about, the right to education had already been recognised on the continent: laws of the nation-states made compulsory education a fundamental goal and a priority obligation as much for governments as for the citizenry several decades earlier, hence, institutions and measures to set them in motion had been put in place long before. Amidst these conditions, the self-perpetuating character of compulsory education has been taken for granted and the issue, as a perfectly settled one, was taken off the political agenda. Given the structures and customary routines in the postwar era it seemed that policies can navigate within a framework that had been established and is to remain as such, hence, it is not the framework but its content that has to be dealt with in policy-making as well as in the day-to-day management of schooling. Thus, it was the quality of education that came to the forefront of policy debates, and not too much attention has been paid to questions like coverage or attendance that were seen to be routinely managed in an unproblematic and satisfactory way[1].

1 For the historic change of focus, see: Eurydice Network: 'Evaluation of Schools Providing Compulsory Education in Europe.'

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SEVENTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME

However, in recent times a set of new phenomena has called for thoroughly revisiting the widely shared belief that the issue of compulsory education had been resolved once and for all. Sizeable groups of children living on European soil seem not to receive even primary education; other groups formally complete compulsory schooling without learning even the basics; yet other groups leave school early or drop out prior to acquiring any certificates usable on the job market; yet others are diverted to the side-tracks of mainstream education. Furthermore, these new phenomena indicating the malfunctioning of compulsory education are heavily loaded with social and ethnic/racial implications: country by country, it is mostly the children of marginalised groups, and most of all, children of poor families of minority ethnic background who are the victims of apparent shortcomings in the workings of the educational systems.

To a large extent, unsatisfactory functioning of the established routines and services follows from the inability of the prevailing educational systems to properly respond to important changes in their surrounding social milieus. These systems were set up amidst the conditions of a rather low level of cross-border geographical mobility, and assumed a high degree of cultural homogeneity within the borders of the nation-states. However, due to immense migration and the social change that this has induced, the initial conditions do not prevail any longer. Much of the tensions arise from the fact that Europe's established national educational systems have been lagging in recognising these deep and lasting changes and adjusting the forms and content of schooling accordingly.

The manifestations of the tensions are not uniform across the continent. The differences stem from the characteristics of migration, earlier inter-ethnic and inter-cultural relations between minority ethnic groups and the respective ethnic majorities, the rigidity/openness of the given educational system, and later opportunities for integration into society beyond education. Along these lines, there seem to be important variations in school attendance, performance, and career opportunities of the affected minority youth.

In broad terms, three major trends can be identified. The first is related to the ongoing intense move from the one-time colonies toward the one-time colonising countries with a concomitant segmentation in the social structure of the latter. These processes face education with increased ethnicisation of diverging school careers and the consequent differentiating opportunities on the labour market. Although language barriers usually play only a limited role here, cultural and religious differences are often translated as symptoms of non-adaptation and are penalised accordingly. What follows is the frequent shifting of the frame of reference from cultural to legal interpretations that conclude in responding to irregularities in attendance by social and institutional separation at an early stage of schooling. However, such corrective measures seldom meet the goal driving their conception: early separation on judicial grounds has a tendency to carry on the implied stigma and often concludes in leave from education ahead of time and/or increases the risks of dropping out at an unfinished stage[2].

The second set of typical tensions surrounds economic migration that once manifested itself in the massive influx of guest-workers who (and later: whose families) settled in Europe despite the initial expectations of the temporary nature of their presence. Although stringent immigration policies of the past two decades have attempted to stop the process, legal and illegal migration toward Europe has apparently continued also in recent years[3]. This has resulted in national educational systems facing new needs to serve children without access to the language of instruction and the required cultural skills that the prevailing routines of mainstream schooling are built on. Due to sluggish responses on the part of school systems, institutional selection on grounds of inadequate performance, discrimination and pronounced segmentation by class and ethnicity, together with high rates of non-attendance are frequent symptoms of the arising conflicts between the affected minority ethnic groups and the schools.

The third process relates in a large part to internal migration and manifests itself mainly in Central and Eastern Europe where policies of forced industrialisation during the decades of state-socialism led to the breaking up of the Roma communities, swept away their traditional occupations and forms of living, but did so without their genuine integration into the new structures of industrialisation and urbanisation. As to education, the lack of integration manifested itself in institutional separation of Roma children in the early years of primary school, their extremely low rates of access to secondary schooling and strong underrepresentation in vocational training.

2 For a detailed discussion of these self-destructive processes, see: Law, Swann et al.: 'Country Report on Education: United Kingdom.'

3 It has to be noted that the composition of migration has changed in the past 10-15 years. While decades ago it was mainly economic migration that dominated the stage, in recent times it is mainly the proportion of refugees and asylum seekers that has been on the rise, while migration purely for economic reasons has lost some of its weight among the background factors. Considering their situation and the implications for education, refugees and asylum seekers are often even in a more precarious situation than 'economic' migrants. (Boswell: *Migration in Europe*).

Against these antecedents, swift marginalisation of Roma during the past two decades of post-communist transformation has turned earlier loose integration to effective social exclusion. Widespread long-term unemployment, massive impoverishment and sharp residential segregation along ethnic lines have contributed to twisting earlier separation in education to institutionalised forms of ghettoisation that have led, in turn, to an intense ethnicisation of failures in schooling and resulted in high occurrences of dropping out.

This document emerged from the conviction that the indicated phenomena are not transient in their nature and cannot be properly addressed without a systematic review of their causes and consequences. Although it is the individual countries of the European continent that seek responses within their educational systems and welfare states (and naturally they do it in a highly diverse manner), most of the issues at stake have implications beyond national boundaries and urge for deliberation on the European level[4]. At this stage, it would be utopian to strive for Europe-wide regulations and novel solutions. Our aim is far more modest than that: it is to initiate a dialogue by articulating the need for collective thinking. Drawn from the experience of the nine countries represented in the EDUMIGROM research project[5], we aim to introduce the varied manifestations of new needs and challenges toward the established institutions and routines of compulsory education and to present some of the country-level responses attempting to address these needs. Since the countries participating in this research initiative exemplify all classical types of the welfare state as well as the post-communist new member states, we believe that rather firm generalisations can be made beyond the given selection.

Challenges to the established frameworks of compulsory education

A review of the legal arrangements on compulsory education reveals great variations in Europe: some countries define age limits and it is education but not schooling that they make mandatory; some others determine the number of school years (and the type of schooling) with only implied concerns on age limits; yet others combine the two principles. Even more diverse are the definitions on coverage: some countries regard the right and duty a matter of citizenship (with late amendments concerning identified and strictly defined groups of non-citizens); some others embrace legal immigrants and circumscribed other groups of foreigners in addition to citizens but exclude 'undocumented people'; yet others provide compulsory education on a territorial principle by covering all children being on the soil of the country at any given time. These variations in regulations reflect great historical diversity: countries with colonial pasts or with traditionally large groups of denizens and foreigners tend to apply the territorial principle, together with an emphasis on mandatory education (but not schooling), while the once closed and relatively homogenous nation-states are still inclined to take citizenship and the form of schooling as the cornerstones of regulation.

Understandably, these historical traits still influence the ways how national educational systems respond to the challenges that vast movements of populations have brought about during the past decades. Due to great differences in their school systems and the existing regulations on compulsory education, the conceptualisations of the conflicts and the applied policies to tackle them show remarkable variation among countries. The discussion that follows relies on background research and data collected in the nine countries of the EDUMIGROM research project.

Getting in

Much in accordance with the general picture on the continent, regulations vary according to the definition of the child population targeted by compulsory education also among our sample countries. In systems applying the territorial principle, total coverage is taken for granted. Its maintenance is seen as the explicit role of the local educational authority that is entrusted to decide about the form of education (schooling, home-schooling, special institution), while compliance with the regulations is defined as the legal responsibility of the parents (guardians). As the data show, it is the territorial principle that proves most effective in guaranteeing that each child is embraced by the system.[6] At the same time, it brings ethnic differences and conflicts into the world of education, which, as discussed below, leads to group-specific problems.

A diametric case is represented by countries that try to maintain the prevailing routines of schooling and keep away the most difficult cases by denying compulsory education for 'illegal' or 'undocumented' groups or leaving their schooling as a matter of case-by-case decision making of the authorities[7]. In this dubious

4 The European-level concerns and the need for comprehensive actions is strongly argued for in a powerful recent document of the European Commission. See: European Commission: Green Paper on Migration & Mobility.

5 For a description of the EDUMIGROM research project see 'About EDUMIGROM' on p.11.

6 For details, see: Law, Swann et al.: ibid; Moldenhawer–Kallehave: 'Country Report on Education: Denmark and Sweden'; Armagnague et al.: 'Country Report on Education: France.'

7 For details, see: Miera: 'Country Report on Education: Germany'; Harbula et al.: 'Country Report on Education: Romania'.

way, certain cultural and behavioural challenges are kept outside the system, though at the expense of depriving groups of children of one of their basic human rights. It follows from the nature of the phenomenon that it is hard to know how many children are affected. At any rate, the yearly number of illegal migrants landing in Europe is estimated between 120,000 and 500,000[8], and since they usually come from countries with fertility rates above the European average, the number of 'undocumented children' can be expected to be rather high. If one adds children of parents whose legal permissions have expired or whose stay was never 'legalised' for historical reasons, it is probably not an overestimation to speak of several tens of thousands (if not hundreds of thousands) of 'illegal' minors whose educational needs might remain fully unmet.

Finally, in countries that apply the citizenship principle with recent amendments toward incorporating certain new groups, full coverage is also not attained. First, although 'undocumented' children usually are not ignored, they are not automatically covered either: is a matter of formal application processes their school attendance, and the mandatory nature of education does not apply to them. Their 'right' for such requests is rather empty, given the risks of appearing for permissions at the authorities. Further, these systems tend to acknowledge a number of exceptions: pregnant teenagers, those whose work is needed at home, those several years above the age of their classmates are either exempted or are transferred to home-schooling – the latter with weak content and loose affiliation to educational institutions.[9]

All in all, the prevailing regulations once elaborated for stably settled and properly documented populations do not always guarantee that each and every child in Europe has access to schooling. Children arriving with poor or no documentation, those frequently moving within or among countries, those having difficulties abiding by the prescribed regulations in time and in a proper manner, and those living in remote circumstances where even social services hardly reach out face a high risk of being 'forgotten'.[10] This negligence seems to affect them with the highest probability at the two ends of compulsory education: they either do not get in to schools (or get in only several years later), or leave early on the grounds of various 'quasi-legal' reasons. Since (new) migrants from poor countries of the South and Roma of usually severely disadvantaged settlements are overrepresented among the affected groups, lack of access to schooling has a pronounced ethnic dimension across the continent.

Life while in school

Despite the above-indicated shortcomings of full coverage, the overwhelming majority of children living in Europe are embraced by one or another form of compulsory education. However, formal registration at school is only but the first step: the completion of compulsory education necessitates a degree of cooperation and the fulfilment of certain minimum requirements usually regulated in the country's law on public education. Our review shows much less differentiation in the content of these laws than among the ones on coverage. As to cooperation, the laws in question regulate school attendance and outline the sanctions in case of non-attendance; concerning fulfilment of the minimum requirements, they determine the forms of assessment and the requisites for advancement within the system; finally, they determine the types of exams and certificates that acknowledge successful completion and attach clearly defined paths of continuation to these accomplishments. In short, regulations on attendance, performance and advancement provide the skeleton of individual school careers, and despite variations according to the structure of the national school systems, there is a high degree of uniformity of the principles.

Following as much from the requirements of efficiency in teaching as from the guarding and child-caring functions of schools, regular attendance is a basic claim. Hence, absenteeism (in its severe form: truancy) is considered a serious failure and a sign of non-cooperation. Most systems make it the parents' duty to rectify non-compliance with this regulation and in case of failing to do so, they are faced with legal sanctions. Non-cooperation is thus criminalised, and is translated into personal failures of both parents and child. Moreover, the consequences are punitive with long-term implications: absenteeism is penalised by exclusion from the school and/or by referral to repeating years of schooling - both conclude with high frequency in unattained graduation, early leave and dropping out. Although a great number of studies have pointed out serious cultural conflicts, fears from discrimination, severe material deprivation, and frequent health-problems in the background, the conceptualisation of absenteeism and truancy still

8 See: *European Union's Communication COM (2000)757 on a 'Community Immigration Policy'*; Scott: 'Undocumented Migrants in Germany and Britain: The Human 'Rights' and 'Wrongs' Regarding Access to Health Care.'

9 For recent amendments and the country-specific details in regulations and practice, respectively, see: Drál' et al.: 'Country Report on Education: Slovakia'; Molnár – Dupcsik: 'Country Report on Education: Hungary'; Katzorová, Marada et al.: 'Country Report on Education: Czech Republic.'

10 Bicocchi: 'Undocumented Children: Invisible Victims of Immigration Control.'

retains its criminal traits.[11] Due to the high occurrence of poverty, low educational background of the parents, and, in many cases, also to language barriers, the school often remains an alien and threatening place for minority ethnic students, whose response to the fears and frustration is 'avoidance', i.e. absenteeism and truancy.[12] These symptoms of non-compliance thus easily become ethnicised by the school and the majority and contribute to the repeated reproduction of stereotypes, turning structural and cultural problems into matters of individual behaviour. Stringent corrective measures are introduced to make 'foreign' people more adaptive and more assimilated. The deepening conflicts manifest themselves in several forms. Firstly, as the scattered data show, the number of children/youth announced 'absent' and/or referred to the police for truancy is on the rise in several countries[13] – even if formally placed into an educational institution, these young people can be regarded lost from the perspective of meaningful compulsory schooling. Secondly, schools try to make attempts to reconcile internal peace and order: 'expel' the non-behaving youth from the institution or place them into a correctional educational unit. Besides increased institutional segregation and the strengthening of inequalities in quality education, these designated 'stores' for problem-children provide guardianship at best but not proper educational services.

Regulations on assessment and performance-based advancement are in the heart of public education: these are the traits of schooling that provide the immediate justification for selection, while also work as powerful labels of giftedness, ability, and capability by which differentiation is personified. Due to these implications, differential performance has long-term career implications that work as much upward as downward. An ample body of literature and statistical data show that minority ethnic youth tend to perform with worse results than ethnic majorities, and inadequate performance often directly results in not completing compulsory education to its full content or full duration.[14] In frequent cases, low performance gives ground to ruling on retaking classes, so students are held back at a lower grade. It is rarely hoped that repeating years of study helps them to catch up, however, their personal selection works as a warning and an indirect incentive for others. In other cases, inadequate performance is to be improved through corrective measures: students are either selected into classes for children with special educational needs or are referred to specialists to deal with them in non-school based educational forms. Since these forms of selection mostly affect minority ethnic children, there is a tendency that the services get highly ethnicised and their attendance leads to intra- and inter-institutional segregation. Institutional segregation then works toward emptying the content of compulsory education: as the literature richly demonstrates, special classes and services provide low quality teaching (significantly below the standard of regular schools) that usually does not suffice for re-entering mainstream education, hence just to the contrary to their initiation, they become the very actors of the two major threats of functional illiteracy and early school leave. These experiences reinforce the conclusion drawn by a number of comparative investigations: the more competitive an educational system is, the more it is inclined to take measures of academic performance as the only legitimate base of selection. Thereby it increases the risk of low-performing students, among them especially minority ethnic students, of falling behind and dropping out. On the other hand, the more integrative a system is, the less emphasis is given to selection according to performance. Thereby the unity of quality training can be maintained and minority ethnic students with low performance remain part of the overarching system of compulsory education. These associations are underscored by the powerful results of a body of recent literature on the actual causes of high probability of low performance among minority ethnic youth.[15] Besides the importance of socio-economic factors already discussed, bilingualism and cultural differences seem to remain largely unacknowledged by the school that tends to interpret these qualifications as inadequate performance and sanctions them with low grades expressing personal inaptitude. In highly competitive systems, language difficulties thus open a direct route to early leave. At the same time, as it is shown by recent Nordic experience, the recognition and due incorporation of this constituent into the methods of instruction in integrative arrangements

11 Epstein: *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving School*; Huskins: *Priority Steps to Inclusion.*

12 Department for Children, School and Family: 'Pupil Absence and Truancy from Schools in England: 1998/1999.'

13 For details, see: Law, Swann et al: ibid; Miera: ibid.

14 For details and cross-country data analysis, see: Gibson: 'Exploring and Explaining the Variability: Cross-National Perspectives on the School Performance of Minority Students'; Heath et al.: 'The Second Generation in Western Europe: Education, Unemployment, and Occupational Attainment'; for country-specific discussions, see: Drál' et al.: ibid; Molnár – Dupcsik: ibid; Brinbaum: 'The School Careers of Ethnic Minority Youth in France; Strand: 'Minority Ethnic Pupils in the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England'.

15 For details, see: Department of Education and Skills: 'Aiming High: Raising the Achievements of Minority Ethnic Pupils'; and also: Miera: ibid; Moldenhawer – Kallehave: ibid.

helps minority ethnic students to advance within the system along with their majority peers.[16]

In sum, European school-systems regulate and sanction attendance and performance largely along uniform principles. Regularity of attendance is required to maintain participation in the system, while advancement bound to performance serves as the most important tool of preparation for later labour market participation. The first set of regulations is insensitive to failures in schooling and criminalises the child's behaviour. The second set is poor in allowing for cultural and linguistic differences and devalues those with slower progress. Due to the intersecting social, cultural and linguistic problems, children from minority ethnic background have a high probability to fail on both dimensions. Although statistical data are not available on the frequency of absenteeism, truancy, repetition of classes or referral to special educational units by ethnicity, local studies and research data indicate a rather frequent – and increasing – occurrence of the mentioned phenomena among minority ethnic groups. Although these different paths do not always end in formal leave, it can be stated with certainty that they all provide fertile ground for quitting one's studies once beyond mandatory school age, undermining the compulsory nature of education.

Being selected out

Apart from the Nordic countries where integrated basic schooling without intermediate selection is provided for the entire time-span of compulsory education, certain forms of tracking while children meet their legal obligation characterise all the school-systems of the continent. The timing, the forms, the grounds of selection and the authority to choose may vary country by country, but one trend seems uniform: minority ethnic students tend to be selected toward tracks that provide less in terms of marketable knowledge than those paths followed in large numbers by the majority.[17] Further, these tracks are usually bound to vocational training with a limited curriculum and a rather poor quality of teaching and do not render transferable knowledge for applying to other types of secondary education – consequently, these programmes often develop into segregated and self-contained forms of schooling that neither provide graduation, nor facilitate later attempts at catching up.[18] Additionally, the conditions that surround training for vocations are insecure and depend to a large extent on industries that often struggle with great difficulties themselves; hence participation in vocational training might be risked by external factors and might conclude in involuntary early leave.[19] Such high degree of precariousness explains a widely experienced phenomenon: instead of integrating, vocational training becomes a high risk terrain of dropping out en masse and thus it proves to be a major arena where students do not pursue compulsory education to its full extent. Here again, it is hard to know the scope of the phenomenon. However, the available proxy indicators signal a rather widespread occurrence. Based on data from 1997, the European educational statistics show that the percentage of those 18-24 year-olds who had no more than lower secondary education while not in school or training was as high as 22.5.[20] In other words, one out of five young people either leaves prior to the compulsory age or at best completes his/her compulsory years but never again continues studying. In light of the above, there is good reason to assume that the rate – if measured – would be significantly higher among minority ethnic students. At this point, failures in compulsory education are directly bound to serious limitations in the opportunities available to the affected young people. As studies and statistics demonstrate, unfinished schooling in vocational tracks often concludes in long-term unemployment and poverty, and thus becomes one of the major sources of socio-economic and cultural deprivation that cannot be overcome at a later stage.[21] In this sense, it can be stated that tracking proves to be a most powerful vehicle of social class formation that works clearly to the detriment of minority ethnic youth.

Although tracking is perhaps the most visible, it is certainly not the only form of selection with immediate consequences within the mechanism of compulsory education. Another phenomenon with massive impact on minority ethnic youth is selection according to 'abilities': children with special educational needs (defined usually in terms of lacking certain intellectual and behavioural traits that are necessary for successful participation) are referred to institutions apart from mainstream education. As mentioned above and supported by a wide range of studies, services in these separate institutions are, as a rule, poor in quality and quantity, and eventually impede advancement: the certificate received here qualifies students for entering only

16 Moldenhawer – Kallehave: ibid; Boldt: 'Tosprogede elever i grundskolen 2006/07.' [Bilingual Pupils in *Grundskolen* 2006/07].

17 Working Committee on Quality Indicators: 'European Report on Quality School Education.'

18 Armagnague et al.: ibid; Miera: ibid.

19 Miera: ibid; Molnár – Dupcsik: ibid.

20 Working Committee on Quality Indicators: ibid.

21 Hövels – Rademacker – Westhoff (eds.): *Early School-leaving, Qualifications and Youth Unemployment.*

a seriously limited range of institutions of further education.[22] Referral to these institutions usually follows a multi-step process with the participation of qualified psychologists, educators, teachers, often even social workers. However, the tests they apply are adjusted to the prevailing school requirements. Hence, it is not a matter of professional bias or prejudices but follows from the very nature of the applied tools that they tend to devalue the performance and ability of children with language difficulties and 'foreign' cultural background. This way children from minority ethnic backgrounds 'objectively' gain a high probability of being sent to these institutions, whereby education according to special needs becomes a robust channel of ethnic/racial segregation and an impediment to receiving meaningful education. This form of selection hits Roma children in the first place: though the proportions vary country by country, it is still a general phenomenon in the Central European region that schools for children with special educational needs are filled up with Roma pupils and vice versa, the proportion of Roma pupils oriented into this segregated form of schooling is several times higher than the averages in the respective cohorts.[23]

To sum up, although tracking to different institutional paths is a built-in constituent of all national school-systems, the actual ways of selection show great variations in forms and timing. It can be stated that the earlier the tracks of separation, the higher the likelihood that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are directed to certain segments of the system. These segments either do not come up to the standard of compulsory education for the majority, or conclude in an impasse that induces, in turn, early leave and final departure from schooling. In addition, early institutional selection has a tendency to develop highly segregated educational units that are imbued with ethnicisation of non- or low performance and block reintegration into mainstream schooling.

Select key policy interventions

As discussed above, meaningful compulsory education is endangered from several angles. In its present forms in Europe, it neither provides full coverage, nor does it render quality service for all, nor does it protect against failures with lifelong consequences. What is more, all the severe shortcomings point in the same direction: minority ethnic youth is multiply disadvantaged and is hit from all directions. Further, failures in compulsory education are usually as much the outcome of socio-economic disadvantages as the consequence of overt or covert cultural conflicts. What follows from this intersectionality is the frequent ethnicisation of poverty that, in the process of schooling, gets its justification by turning the prevailing tensions into low performance and individual failures in adaptation. Thus, policies that aim at assuring meaningful compulsory education for all have to take into account as much the complexity of socio-economic factors and their interplay with ethnic differentiation in the background as the ethnicised manifestations of failures in schooling. This requires concerted efforts in education, employment, welfare, and housing – to name the most important areas where severe inequalities by class and ethnicity manifest themselves in the most concentrated forms. While acknowledging the need for such broadly conceived policies and actions, this brief focuses merely on issues of education and the immediate conditions of schooling.

There are four distinct, markedly different phases in the process of compulsory education, with their own causes and manifestations of shortcomings. The first is the point of entrance where the great issue at stake is coverage. The second is the first years of schooling with potential short- and longer- term consequences of the accumulation of early failures in performance. The third phase is advancing in compulsory school with the implied risks of non-attendance, truancy, referral for repeating classes (with over-aged attendance), exclusion, and, in extreme cases, of early leave. The fourth phase is early tracking (though timewise it might overlap also with earlier forms of institutional selection) that entails the risks of leaving with unattained certificates and/or ultimately dropping out. Given the differences in the nature of the involved tensions and also in the age of the affected students, different sets of policies should be planned and framed accordingly.

It seems clear that a first step toward designing any powerful interventions has to be the recognition of the fact that although defects in compulsory education are widely experienced, systematic knowledge to inform and orient truly meaningful actions has been largely missing to date. Due to a large extent to the very nature of the phenomenon, even the exact numbers of children failing to complete compulsory education are unknown. Further, very little information is available about their age-distribution, socio-economic conditions, ethnic background, even about their geographic dispersion. Additionally, there is only sporadic evidence on the manifold manifestations of failures in compulsory education: locally collected information on non-attendance, truancy, exclusion, early leave, repetition, etc. are very seldom processed to produce statistics,

22 UNESCO: 'The Salamanca statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education.'

23 Katzorová, Marada et al.: ibid; Molnár – Dupcsik: ibid; Harbula et al: ibid; Drál' et al.: ibid.

and one hardly ever finds in-depth data-analyses that would reveal associations between the various forms of failures in compulsory education and the varied socio-economic, demographic, ethnic, linguistic, cultural and geographic characteristics in the background. Therefore, we recommend the launching of European-level research initiatives and carefully designed systematic data collections with the aims of mapping the occurrences, the manifestations and the major determinants of failures in compulsory education and to explore the multifarious character of the phenomenon. We believe that such systematic work is one of the key preconditions of any substantive policy-making toward reconstructing full coverage and mitigating the prevailing ethnic/social disadvantages.

The ideas below have to be read as first attempts that should be – and certainly will be – refined in the light of concerted interdisciplinary research.

Coverage

It can hardly be disputed that the most seriously at risk are those children who fall out of the systems of compulsory education even without being recognised: they are the forgotten group of 'undocumented' children. It seems it is only the territorial principle of providing compulsory education that reaches out to this group as well and allows for their unconditional inclusion into elementary schooling. With recent amendments in their initially citizenship-based regulations, many countries have actually taken steps toward substantially extending coverage. In light of such convergence in the practical implications of the regulations, it is perhaps feasible that within the foreseeable future all European countries turn to the territorial principle in their regulations and forgo the differentiation between 'documented' (entitled) and 'undocumented' (non-entitled) children. This way, at least in the legal sense, children's fundamental human right to free compulsory education could be reconstructed on the continent.

Early stage

To reduce the risks of early failures that might result in repeating years of study and may easily become the cradle also of later non-attendance, truancy, exclusion, and ultimate dropping out, a set of policies on early intervention can be recommended.

The most powerful sphere of intervention can be the preschools. Recently, some countries have expanded mandatory attendance also to the last year prior to commencing compulsory education, thereby making attempts to overcome earlier disparities in preschool attendance. Since preschools usually prepare for school through mobilising also sets of skills other than the ones required later in education, culturally they are easily accessible even for children struggling with language difficulties and/or coming from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. The *expansion of preschool education* and its deliberate targeting toward minority ethnic children can be an important safeguard against early school failures due to language and cultural hindrances and it can establish later successful advancement by developing early communication skills.

Poor command of the language of instruction at school is one of the frequent causes of early failure. At the same time, there is widespread fear that acknowledging the multilingual character of society and offering education solely in minority languages may lead to institutional separation and ethnic segregation. However, recent attempts in the Nordic countries at making bilingual teaching an organic part of mainstream education have brought about promising results in improving the school assessment of minority ethnic youth and reducing their dropout rates toward the end of compulsory education, while the integrity of schooling has still been maintained. The *extension of multilingual and multicultural teaching* at the early stage of schooling seems to provide efficient protection against early frustration and experiences of undervaluation, and assists in reducing ethnic inequalities in performance. Beyond the obvious immediate advantages, such schemes and programmes work also as efficient forms of prevention by reducing the risks of longer-term accumulation of school failures due to language barriers.

Children with language difficulties, limited social skills and certain behavioural problems poorly tolerated by mass education are often oriented to schools/classes for 'children with special educational needs'. As research data show, children with minority backgrounds face a higher than average risk to be assessed as 'in special educational need', whereby many of them are separated from their 'unproblematic' peers early on. This separated form of schooling is thus ethnicised, and what is more, the stigma attached to 'special needs' gets imbued with pronounced ethnic content. Furthermore, referral to this form of schooling proves irreversible: as data show, there is little chance of returning to the 'normal' track at a later stage. Given all the implied disadvantages and dangers, a re-conceptualisation of 'special educational needs' and a profound reorganisation of such a service is needed. According to the results of a number of experiments, *integrated teaching in combination with extracurricular 'catching-up'* services for the affected children helps to avoid the listed traps, while it improves the inter-ethnic relations among children, thereby also assisting inclusion in an indirect way. In any event, separation by 'special educational needs'

due to behavioural and linguistic problems should be avoided. If still introduced, then it ought to take place at a rather late stage of schooling and in a way that facilitates easy return to mainstream education.

Advancing in compulsory school

As the pedagogical literature reveals, it is usually not one single cause, but the interplay of a number of social, cultural and psychological factors that conclude first in failures in performance, then in frequent non-attendance, truancy and ultimate dropping out. On the part of the school, it is commonly a set of 'disciplining' tools that are applied in response. However, punishment, referral to class repetition or exclusion hardly eliminate the problem, on the contrary, sometimes they even deepen it. In addition, they nearly inevitably lead to the criminalisation of these failures that easily results in stigmatising those most affected: minority ethnic youth and their families. Thus, the recommended policies have to work in two directions: on the one hand, they should assist in avoiding criminalisation; on the other hand, complex support has to be given to the child and the family as well that reach the causes of the enduring school failures and help to eliminate them.

In order to avoid criminalising non-attendance, and most importantly, the student involved, the forms of punishment should be revisited. Instead of the discriminatory measures of exclusion, referral to class repetition, and assigning fines, efforts for inclusion should be offered through *individual case-management* with the involvement of trained counsellors, psychologists, youth welfare workers. Additionally, the penalising edict should not imply terminal rules: return to the school and the class community should be guaranteed upon improvement. Furthermore, parents should not be penalised, least through suspending their welfare assistance – an important source of living in most of the affected families. Instead, teachers and social workers should seek ways of getting parents involved in their child's school affairs and gain their consent and collaboration in reviving the child's lost interest in schooling.

Non-attendance is usually the outcome of a longer preceding process: the child receives bad marks, his/her performance is undervalued or remains unnoticed; these negative experiences then lower performance which, in turn, concludes in falling self-esteem and intensifying fears of further frustrations – all these give rise to a self-perpetuating damaging spiral. It is worth noting that marking plays an important role here by attaching expressive numeric values to performance. Though the practice of marking is a built-in element of all educational systems and is considered a necessary incentive in competition, there are significant variations across countries in its application. Experiments show that the longer the schools follow the routines of detailed verbal assessment and qualitative evaluation, the better the opportunities of low-performing children to catch up and to preserve a healthy self-respect. Since all forms of absenteeism and early leave are in close association with shame and frustration caused by low marks, the *postponement of marking* can be an effective measure in maintaining meaningful participation in education.

Since it is often the parents' own failures and their consequent disinterest in schooling that plays an important role in the background of non-attendance and dropping out, in many cases, it is family counselling with the participation of adults and children alike that promises some efficient results. In frequent cases, the causes can be identified in extreme poverty: either that families cannot meet the costs of education, or the labour of the young one is needed at home, or h/she has to engage in earning for livelihood. In these cases, there is no hope of eliminating the problem without providing ample support and services to the family as a whole. This requires *coordinated actions* between teachers, social workers, community development experts, and often even the local medical staff. Hence, the local educational authorities should assist the schools in developing established and well organised forms of collaboration with a range of *local social and child protection services*. In addition, the municipalities and/or the state should provide funding for establishing the necessary structures of collaboration and aid the schools in maintaining these mechanisms.

Selection

Educational systems across Europe show great variations in the timing and forms of tracking. But whatever arrangements are applied, there is a surprisingly high degree of uniformity in the impact selection has on minority ethnic youth: country by country, tracking becomes the point of departure within the school structure where their relative disadvantages in comparison to their peers suddenly increase. They tend to be selected to forms of schooling that provide less valuable certificates than the ones attended by the ethnic majorities, additionally, their risks of dropping out increase exponentially. In light of these associations, a straightforward conclusion can be drawn: tracking should be postponed as late as possible, and the rigidity of selection should be reduced as much as possible. Given that in most cases the necessary changes would require fundamental structural reforms in education that can hardly gain short-term political support, realistic recommendations should not go that far but remain within the realm of the existing frameworks. With this limitation in mind, two sets of policies can be suggested: firstly, well

designed interventions can be proposed that help to enrich the content of schooling in the 'devalued' track and assist horizontal mobility between the various forms of schooling; secondly, a set of measures and services can be recommended that target the dropouts and provide extra-school education to reduce their immediate and future disadvantages.

Upon selection it is usually the varying schemes of lower secondary level vocational training that minority ethnic youth are most likely oriented towards. Although the content of such trainings varies country by country, it is a general feature that traditional subjects of schooling are represented with very low weight, and this very fact hinders change among school-tracks and/or the later completion of secondary education. At the same time, the acquisition of marketable skills and qualifications is highly dependent on the forms and intensity of collaboration between the schools and industry. Given these features, it is the *improvement of the quality of vocational training* that should be in the focus of the reforms aiming at achieving better results in compulsory education. On the one hand, education in vocational schools should make accessible knowledge that qualifies for change among tracks. On the other hand, educational authorities should help to establish direct contacts between the schools and industry and arrange for utilisable apprenticeship for each and every student. This way early leave because of the apparent 'uselessness' of the training and high dropout rates due to failures in finding proper apprenticeship can be reduced.

The sudden increase in dropout rates upon tracking can be attributed to several factors. Beside the above-discussed shortcomings of the present forms of vocational training, it is mainly the accumulation of earlier failures, a deeply felt frustration because of being personally devalued, and an often unmitigated anger toward the school as a hostile institution that give the motivations for leaving. Against this emotional background, rigid enforcement of the prevailing rules of compulsory education may cause more harm than improvement. Additionally, it may induce criminalisation with all its accompanying dangers discussed above. In order to avoid such traps and still maintain at least loose ties with education, *new flexible forms of teaching* can be recommended acknowledging the newly gained 'personal freedom' of the young, but still providing utilisable knowledge. Such provisions can be offered in whole-day services or in the form of the recently widely introduced 'second chance' programmes. Additionally, well-funded and well-staffed *adult education programmes* might assist in later return to the framework of formal schooling and acquiring the neccesary certificates at a later stage. While these practical solutions are beneficial in reducing the harm suffered by early leave and they protect against extreme marginalisation, at the same time, their strength is also their weakness. Firstly, since it is mostly minority ethnic youth whom they serve, these extra-school arrangements easily get ethnicised and segregated on ethnic grounds. Secondly, by giving a certain degree of legitimation to early leave from schooling, despite all efforts, they hardly prove helpful in assisting in return to school. With these drawbacks in mind, it is above all the prevention of early leave that should be addressed by policies on compulsory education, and it is primarily the schools themselves that should be the leading actors in their implementation.

Towards the analysis of European policy contexts

This document modestly aims to initiate a European-level dialogue on the issue of compulsory education. Such a dialogue can take place only by recognising and duly acknowledging that the existing arrangements of compulsory schooling do not serve all children of the continent, and some fundamental reforms are necessary in order to take powerful corrective action. The interventions suggested above were outlined with the goal in mind that the necessary reforms should embrace all phases and all formations of compulsory education. At the same time, we are aware of their limitations. Firstly, there are great variations in the school systems that allow for different degrees of structural modifications. Secondly, the groups at highest risk of dropping out from compulsory education or completing it in an unsatisfactory way vary country by country, hence educational policies have to take into account highly differing socio-economic conditions, cultural environments and a great diversity in inter-ethnic relations. Thirdly, although it is the schools that can become the key agents in achieving improvement in school attendance of the groups at risk, this task easily conflicts with their other commitments amidst the intensifying competition in education. Lastly, the issue of compulsory education is deeply embedded into the prevailing social and inter-ethnic relations of society at large, hence policies for its improvement have to tackle a wide range of phenomena beyond schooling. This makes the matter an important political claim, foreseeably with varying degrees of acceptance and support on the stages of national politics. Given these conditions, our recommendations remain but on a rather general level. At the same time, we strongly hope that they are potent enough to provoke discussion that once may conclude in outlining some common principles of an all-European policy to make compulsory education accessible for all.

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About EDUMIGROM

The initiative on "Ethnic Differences in Education and Diverging Prospects for Urban Youth in an Enlarged Europe" (EDUMIGROM) is a collaborative research project under the auspices of the European Commission's Seventh Framework Programme (Grant Agreement 217384). The project aims to study how ethnic differences in education contribute to the diverging prospects for minority ethnic youth and their peers in urban settings. It is a comparative endeavour involving nine countries from among old and new member states of the European Union, including Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. EDUMIGROM began in March 2008 and will run through February 2011.

About EDUMIGROM outputs

The EDUMIGROM research project plans to produce a variety of outputs connected to its research agenda: country studies, comparative reports, policy briefs, a series of occasional papers, newsletters and other publications, which are intended to provide background and stimulate discussion on issues related to the education and integration of minority ethnic youth in Europe.

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